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ABSTRACT

An individualized English composition laboratory at a community college maintained a student completion rate of only 45% to 55% over a period of several semesters as a result of the following factors: the week long pretest administered to determine student needs was intimidating to students; students became frustrated at being asked to work on limited objectives for long periods of time; the open attendance policy resulted in a great deal of student absence; students had difficulty figuring out the instructions in the programmed materials; the on-the-spot grading promised to students proved impossible to provide; and instructors could not agree on grading standards. Staff members finally reorganized the laboratory by making the pretest shorter and less threatening to students, imposing attendance requirements and work deadlines, dropping attempts at on-the-spot grading, and supplementing the laboratory with lecture and discussion sessions, which were generally team-taught. Instructors also developed consistent grading standards. The organizational changes increased the student completion rate to 88%. (GW)

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THE LAB DOES WORK

During the spring semester of 1977, I agreed to conduct a PCRC[1] workshop entitled "The Lab Doesn't Work." Certainly, I thought to myself, proving this thesis will be easy. My own English composition lab, since its inception during the fall semester of 1975, had maintained a student completion rate between 45% and 55%; the only exception had occurred the preceding semester, when the rate had plummetted to 15%, well below the campus average of around 50%. So far, then, the lab had not provided much of an alternative to the traditional English composition classroom which it had replaced at Clark County Community College. However, by the end of the 1977 summer sessions, I was no longer convinced that the lab could not work. After making some sweeping changes in my lab program for the spring semester, I had witnessed a jump in the student completion rate from approximately 60% for that semester to 72% for the first summer session and 88% for the second summer session.[2] Previously, though, summer sessions had possessed the highest attrition rates of the year. Obviously, then, something had clicked, proving that the English composition lab could work.

What had not worked was the purely individualized lab that I had supported for several semesters. Ideally, in this lab, most students will be mature enough and so highly

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motivated that they will fulfill the course objectives on their own, with little instructor supervision, concentrating only on their weak areas and so learning more in the process than they would have in the traditional classroom, where the instructor often repeats what the students already know. This lab, then, would serve the students. Some of them would focus more heavily upon grammar than others would, and any lucky student who could demonstrate his mastery of grammar, paragraph, and editing skills could begin with the essay. Necessarily, therefore, at the beginning of the semester, each student must be pretested to enable the lab instructors to determine his writing strengths and weaknesses, assigned an individual program of assignments so that he could master his particular objectives, and allowed to work at his own level, taking anywhere from, say, two weeks to two semesters to finish the course. Further, students would attend this lab at times most convenient for them and, upon completion of each assignment, would receive immediate feedback from the on-the-spot grading that we--my lab instructors and I--had promised.

The success of such a program largely depended upon the pretest. Our first pretest consisted of a sixty-sentence grammar section, a paragraph review, and an argumentative essay written on a given topic. Though the pretest took one week to complete, we reasoned that such a test would reveal specific areas of weakness much more accurately than, for instance, an opening day paragraph, since the three parts

were intended to complement each other and illuminate consistent patterns errors. For instance, if a student had difficulty with comma placement in all parts of the test, then we could logically assume that he should devote some of his program to the study of punctuation. On the other hand, if a student had minor difficulty with possessives in the grammar section but had written a paragraph and an essay that did not contain corresponding errors, then we could not assume that this area represented a problem for the student; often, in such cases, the errors resulted from the student's inability to do well on objective diagnostic grammar tests. In theory, giving such a pretest made sense. In reality, for most students, it was a bad dream, in which thei worst fears about college composition courses were quickly confirmed.

In fact, the pretest created more problems than it solved. For one thing, many students--particularly those returning to the classroom for the first time in fifteen or twenty years--were so intimidated by this obstacle that we were apparently asking them to hurdle during their first week that they immediately dropped from the course. In fact, for some reason, some students believed that,if they did not pass this test, they would be sent away and asked never to return. As for the instructors, these pretests condemned us to one full week of hard labor, as we fastidiously graded the things and returned them, along with students' individualized learning programs, on the third week of class.

Further, students generally did not progress as well on their own as they probably would have in a traditional classroom. To give the students a sense of progress, we had broken each individualized learning program into three areas of study: (1) basic paragraphing and grammar; (2) advanced paragraphing, which involved the writing of such types as description and definition, and editing for such problems as wordiness and repetition; and (3) essay writing, beginning with the analysis and ending with the argument. Instead of quickly mastering objectives and steadily moving up the ladder of skills, students spent much of the semester struggling to get beyond the first set of rungs. Indeed, the fragments and comma splices which the students had seemed to eliminate in area one assignments often reappeared in startling numbers in the editing assignments or in the essays. In response, we sent the students back and made them re-conquer these errors before going on again. Consequently, frustration grew in the students, many of whom dropped out after being sent back down the ladder again and again.

Other elements conspired to reveal the faults of our purely individualized lab. For instance, intending to take advantage of the open attendance policy, many students decided to defer English composition until late in the semester when they would return and, with a giant effort, cram the course into three or four weeks; needless to say, exhausted by the first ten or eleven weeks of the semester,

many were never heard from again. Additionally, students grew dissatisfied with our instructional material and methods. They found the programmed grammar text English 3200 less than inspiring and fought with the editing, paragraph, and essay packages whose explanations often seemed confusing without the aid of classroom discussion. In short, these students had become accustomed to having instructions explained to them. Moreover, they became bored, impatient, even irritable as they waited, often for an hour, for an instructor to finish grading another student's assignment and grade their own. In fact, lab problems were not confined to students' responses to the program. Clearly, the instructors were not the quick and efficient graders that they should have been in order to fulfill the promise of immediate feedback. The instructors even resisted this role. Reduced to the status of mechanics, they often found their task unexciting, unrewarding, and totally exhausting as they hopped from student to student, continually shifting intellectual gears as they moved from fair writing to poor writing to good writing and so on. To complicate matters, the instructors graded differently; thus, they could not agree upon grading standards. This conflict expressed itself most dramatically in two particular instructors who, competing for an open full-time position in the lab, frequently quarrelled openly over one student's mark. The students, beginning to question our competence, rightly asked, "How can we learn anything in this place if

our instructors can't even agree?"

Many of these headaches remained semester after semester, even though I tried to improve a method with which the present college administration was slowly constricting other areas of instruction at Clark County Community College. For example, I changed the pretest. The next semester (spring 1976), I began the course by showing Write it Right I, a Center of the Humanities tape-slide presentation which reviews the paragraph, and requiring the students to write a paragraph in the lab. My intention was not so much to diagnose writing skills--that would come with the following assignments--as to identify those students who were not ready for college composition; we recommended such students to drop the course and enroll in a basic grammar class. Further, this opening day exercise succeeding in relaxing the students, for the presentation allowed them the chance to discuss and ask questions about the paragraph before they wrote one. Consequently, most of them stayed with the course for the first few weeks. Yet, attendance remained a problem, even though it became a requirement during the fall of 1976; in fact, we asked students to attend the lab only during those times for which they had registered(8:00 students were to come at 8:00, 9:25 students at 9:25, and so on). Students were still dissatisfied with instructional material, though we had polished and rewritten our packages. Students continued to drop from the course, even though we now accepted mediocre work and allowed students whose writing was only satisfactory to advance more easily

from one area to another. And it seemed to matter little that, while accepting each other's differences in grading, we instructors had actually adopted similar standards. Problems plagued the program until, during the fall semester of 1976, the student completion rate bottomed out at 15%. Obviously, drastic changes were in order.

The new lab--the one that had to work--grew out of the more realistic and traditional belief that most students lack motivation to complete their assignments without explanations, deadlines, and other rather strict policies. Thus, in addition to requiring that every student take the paragraph pretest, we stressed the importance of attendance; students with six unexcused absences would be automatically withdrawn from the course. Further, whereas in the past students could do most of their writing out of the lab, they were now expected to write most of their paragraphs and essays in the lab where they could get help from instructors. And, unless excused, students had to hand in the writing assignments on a pre-determined date. To ease our burden, we told the students that, while they could discuss their graded assignments with an instructor, we could not grade all of their writing in class. In fact, written assignments were generally returned one class meeting after they were handed in, thereby still providing students with immediate feedback. Just as important, the instructors devoted at least one hour per week to a lecture and discussion session, which was generally team-taught and often effectively supplemented by these Center of the Humanities

presentations:

> Who's Afraid of Grammar I, II, III(These provide a good introduction to the sentence as well as some interesting sentence combining exercises.)
>
> Write It Right I, II, III(These provide discussions of the paragraph and of word choice.)
>
> Toward the Year 2000: Will We Survive the Future? I, II (These served as an introduction to the problem-solution and argumentative essays.)

Students used the days not devoted to lecture and discussion for writing, re-writing, doing grammar and editing assignments(which were still individualized), or conferring with an instructor.

The 88% completion rate, therefore, seems to have resulted from the synthesis of traditional, tutorial, and individualized methods within one setting. Success also depended upon the gradual evolution among the instructors of consistent grading standards, which came about almost naturally once the two dissident instructors had been dismissed; no one instructor was really easier or harder than the other instructors. We were organized and, at least on the surface, supported each other's techniques and standards. However, the most vital element was the spirit of camraderie which grew not only out of our having experienced a failure of sorts together but from informal meetings on and off campus, meetings which indicated the instructors' dedication to making the program work for the students. Finally, the team-teaching was a hit because the instructors had come to understand, appreciate, and cooperate with each other. And as one instructor taught, the other one or two instructors present in the lab graded

papers, met with students from other class hours who were making up assignments or receiving tutorial help, or reinforced the lecture-discussion. We had, at last, developed an exciting method of teaching college composition.

Under a new administration, however, the English lab was terminated after the summer of 1977. The English lab had been expensive; and, following a budget cutback, the college no longer had the funds to support this program. Yet I had learned that the English lab can work. Indeed, because it accomodated a variety of teaching techniques and provided the student with a continual opportunity to discuss his writing with an instructor, the English lab did represent a viable alternative to the traditional classroom.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Pacific Coast Regional Conference(PCRC) for Teachers of English in Two-Year Colleges, held in Anaheim, California, March 2-4, 1978.

2. I have provided a breakdown for the completion rates of each English composition class offered at Clark County Community College during the summer of 1977:

Time	Students Beginning First Five-Week Session	Students Completing
9:30-11:00 M-F	43	31(72%)
11:00-12:30 M-F	40	28(70%)
6:00-8:00 M-Th	25	19(76%)

Second Five-Week Session

9:30-11:00 M-F	22	18(82%)
11:00-12:30 M-F	11	10(91%)
6:00-8:00 M-Th	17	16(94%)